

Neighborhood Grapevine

News from the City of Milwaukee's
Department of Neighborhood Services

DNS wins Innovation award 4th year in a row

Continuing its leadership position for innovation, the Department of Neighborhood Services has again won one of five top awards for innovation in the City of Milwaukee.



The award was chosen from among 19 entries from other City departments for innovations created within their organizations. DNS was among five winners and DNS was also among four finalists. A group of four independent judges selected the winners and finalists. The department was honored at a ceremony held in the rotunda of city hall on September 16th.

The winning entry was part of a multi departmental operation referred to as "Property Flipping". Primary participants from DNS are Inspector Larry Govin-Matzat, Deputy Commissioner Marty Collins and Jim Styers of the Property Recording program. Commissioner Lee Jensen accepted an award on behalf of the department.

"Property-Flipping" was a fraud scheme by which real estate speculators buy and sell properties quickly to escalate property values to obtain mortgage money. The flippers run off with the ill gotten gains and leave the buyer and ultimately the city with a worthless parcel of property. The practice went unnoticed for many years because so many departments were impacted. No one single department was responsible for monitoring or addressing flipping.

Thus, this project required work by a number of departments all involved with properties. One of the key components is the DNS Property Recording program. Whenever property is transferred or sold that is required to be recorded, a document noting the ownership and sale must be

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New DNS web site scores 12,897 lookups in first week.

The first week the new Department of Neighborhood Services (DNS) records went on line, nearly 13,000 inquiries were made about properties in Milwaukee using the Neighborhood Services System (NSS). The newly updated DNS web site was unveiled August 27, 1999 by Mayor John O. Norquist.

The DNS site now features information on ownership, service requests (complaints), violations and permits. Also, a new one-click interface accesses all available web information from all City sites. Now, in one click you can know everything from Assessment to Zoning. In addition you can find information from the Assessor's, Treasurer's, Election, and DNS. Special Assessments are available at the Department of Public Works site, but need a taxkey to use.

The new access should be a boon for neighborhood groups, real estate agents, rental proper-

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"Accident Elf" Averts South Side Fire Tragedy

What are the odds of a fire occurring in the middle of a fire inspection? What are the odds of an "Accident Elf" doing a good deed? Pretty good if you ask inspector Sharon Blando. On July 15, 1999, DNS special enforcement inspector Blando was inspecting a pair of 4-family apartment buildings. She did the first building without incident and was in the basement of the 2nd building when she heard the smoke detector go off. It was about 1pm and she thought someone was cooking lunch. Then there was some screaming.

Blando ran upstairs to the second floor to find a smoke filled hallway and a woman standing at her apartment doorway unwilling to move. Smoke was pouring out and Blando told the woman to leave. She refused. A mother and her son from across the hall opened their door to find what all the commotion was about. When the young man saw the fire, he

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filed with the department. Secondly, thanks to the internet, investors outside the city of Milwaukee can easily access property values and condition reports from the Assessors, DNS, and Treasurer's web site. Prior to this it was easy to mislead investors. Subsequent and ongoing investigations by Federal authorities have resulted in several arrests with more likely to follow.

DNS also won a finalist award. That entry was the Residential Affidavit Program. The innovation was for the creation of a system to encourage city residents to take out permits for typically minor repairs or special projects. By local and national code, all electrical repairs must be made and inspected by a licensed individual. The lowest minimum fee was \$40. Under the new system, a licensed contractor does the work and fills out an affidavit saying the work was done according to code. A random spot check assures the reliability of the contractor. The fee is only \$10 and to date residents and contractors like the new system. Contributors are Skip Seager, Administrator DNS; Ed Piacentine, Electrical Supervisor (now retired); and John Cyr, Ast. Supervisor (now with the Electricians Journeyman Training Program.)

Congratulations to all winners. The department is sponsoring it's own annual innovation program. Winners from that review will be forwarded to the city-wide awards for 2000. ☺

DNS Innovation Award Deadline

from Gary Armstrong

A joint labor and management committee has been working on creating a department-wide innovation award process. The objective is to afford recognition to staff that have created innovations that have improved their work products and processes. It will be patterned on the City Innovation Awards competition that is held annually.

The criteria for judging will be virtually identical. The DNS version will have three categories in which to compete: process, product and "other" [something which is not one of the first two or combines elements of both] and three runner up awards. Judging will be done by a three judge panel from outside the department. Awards will be an as yet undefined form of recognition and will be presented at the annual meeting of the department in November. The tentative application deadline is October 15.

The sentiment of the committee members is that there are a lot of people who work in DNS that take pride in their work and who deserve recognition for the effort of making it work better. Start thinking of what you might submit in an application. It can be small or large but if it has been in effect for 6 months, has made things faster, less expensive, provided a better quality service or in some other way improved the things that you do, please consider it a possible candidate. Applications are posted around the department and available from supervisors. ☺



New Rent Withholding Policy

The rent withholding ordinance has been modified by the Common Council at the request of the Health Department and the City Attorney's office.

The limitation that prohibited rent withholding for exterior painting violations has been removed. In addition, tenants can no longer stay in possession of their units and pay all of their rent into rent withholding escrow with the Department. The code now reads, in part "If the tenant remains in possession, rent abates to the extent the tenant is deprived of the full normal use of the premises" See section 200-22-a. Tenants will be asked to make the proportionality decision. These code change apply to orders issued after the effective date of the code change, 3/23/99.

A proposed code change has recently been introduced that, if enacted, will substantially repeal the earlier amendments. Stay tuned! "Those who have great respect for the law and who enjoy sausage should never watch either of them being made."—Otto Von Bismark ☺

Nuisance Vehicle Ordinance Update

from Martin Collins, Deputy Commissioner

The Public Safety Committee of the Common Council has unanimously passed two proposed ordinances initiated by DNS. It modifies the notice process concerning nuisance vehicles. In 1998 it took on average between 60 and 90 days to get a nuisance vehicle towed to the shredder.

The new ordinance will allow that to be substantially accelerated. The goal is to reduce that time to an average of 20 days from initial inspection to tow desk. The required notices have shrunk from five to three.

The inspector determines that the vehicle meets the definition of a nuisance vehicle, applies a condemned notice and order sticker and upon returning to the office, sends a written notification to both the owner of the property where the vehicle is located and to the "V.I.N. owner" as determined by the state DMV records. Once 3 days for mailing has passed and three days for compliance, a reinspection occurs, pictures are taken and the order is given to the Assistant Supervisor for final approval before it is sent to DPW to be given to a tow truck contractor. Unlike vehicles towed by the police as abandoned, these vehicles are not taken to the tow yard but rather go directly to Miller Compressing to be recycled. A provision was recently added to the code that says that the owner must contest the basis for DNS declaring the vehicle as a nuisance by appealing within 72 hours to the Commissioner. Failure to appeal means that they lose their right to contest that basis in any subsequent hearing. Nuisance vehicles send a negative message about a community. The faster they are removed, the better the city looks.

In August, four inspectors implemented the ordinance on a pilot basis. The entire nuisance control staff now used the new procedure.

My thanks to all the inspectors, supervisors and clerks who have helped to make this a reality. ☺



In 1985 Sharon Blando and Cheri Cooks play a pair of "accident elves" who start a home fire in "Home Safe Home." 14 years later Sharon helps prevent injury during a real house fire by persuading some reluctant residents to get out.

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incredulously asked why the fire inspector does not have a fire extinguisher. Since Blando just finished the fire inspection, she knew there were no extinguishers. (Four family buildings are not required to have an extinguisher.)

The woman was wearing a sleeveless long dress but would not leave. The woman spoke little English, but was motioning to her head and arms that she could not go outside. She was a recent Muslim immigrant from Pakistan and could not go out in public without something to cover up. The mother and son refused to leave because they had two snakes worth \$500 each in their apartment. Now Blando had to convince 3 people to leave.

Blando went downstairs to call 911 but the phone didn't work. Neither did the first attempt on her cell phone. After more 911 difficulties on her cell phone, she ran outside where the people in the first building were already outside watching the fire. Blando asked them to call 911 and they said they did. Blando then asked the bystanders to bring a shirt and table cloth for the Muslim woman to wear so she'd leave.

Finally the reluctant residents all left. By the time the fire department arrived everyone was out and no one was hurt. The snakes survived the ordeal as well. There was extensive damage to the kitchen. Everyone expressed their thanks to Blando with hugs and kisses. The Muslim lady shared that she was 2 months pregnant as well. Sharon says she felt like she was on cloud nine for a month.

However this incident shows a potential problem with fire safety in the community. Cultural customs and financial loss may cloud a person's judgement about personal safety with regard to fire. While most inspectors have seen the movie "Fire Power" and recognize the deadly threat of a fire burning for only five minutes, the public needs to know the same information. Now for the "Accident Elf" connection.

Ironically, Sharon had a starring role in a fire safety play conducted by the department at the 1985 Summerfest Children's area. It was also turned into a video program and aired on the City Channel 26 and MATA Channel 14. It was a short skit targeted to children called "Home Safe Home". It is a story about an "Accident Elf" (played by Sharon) that encourages children to do unsafe things. Fortunately, a hero named "A-LERT" arrives in the nick of time and saves the day. Who would have thought a person who's claim to fame as a trouble maker and trickster, would end up some day as a hero arguing with people about getting out of a burning building? ☺

Telephone complaint response extended to Garbage complaints

from Kathleen Werderitch,

The Customer Service Center of DNS has incorporated the lessons learned during an earlier pilot program in the Nuisance Section to improve the timeliness of garbage nuisance abatement. Staff members attempt to contact the owner of property to inform them that DNS has received a garbage nuisance complaint. The owner is made aware of the condition, and the need to remove the debris before an inspector goes out, observes the condition, and issues an order. The staff explains to the owner that if the City has to have the debris removed, the cost will be added as a special charge to their property taxes. The personal contact approach has reduced the number of orders to remove garbage and freed up inspector time to deal with other nuisances.

So far it is working very well and we have had no problems with the people we have contacted. In fact, they appreciate the call. ☺

DNS helps during "Week of Caring"

from Ron Roberts, Special Enforcement Ast. Sup.

On August 24, 25, and 27 several volunteers from the Department of Neighborhood Services participated in the United Way Week of Caring. These volunteers took time out of their busy schedules to help the needy.

The projects included painting garages in a Sherman Park neighborhood, painting a group home in Milwaukee for Transitional Living Services, pushing wheelchairs for Community Care Organization who sponsored a field trip for the elderly. We also sponsored a food drive at both offices coordinated by Kathy Werderitch.

The following employees volunteered: Ron Roberts, Judy Hartung, Kathleen Werderitch, Laurie Petri, Dan Handle, Karen Jacobs, Todd Vandre, Roger Cortez, Yolanda Thomas, Julie Bloshore, Mike Word, Doug Giles, Jon Wardecke, Stan Bieda, Adam Hartung, Kathy Kendzierski, Gail Martinez, Tracy Thomas and Robert Jones. Let's all join in thanking them for their services. ☺

SUMMER STAFF BEEFS UP NEIGHBORHOOD CLEAN-UP EFFORTS

by John Cullaton, Nuisance Control Officer

David Carter, Matthew Dama and Kevin Failey were hired on April 5, 1999 as Vector and Nuisance Control Officers (temporary) under the CBGA "Neighborhood Clean Up" program.

They worked in that capacity until the middle of this month. Their primary duties involved writing orders regarding community sanitation and nuisance vehicle violations on residential properties in the central city. Other suspected violations, which are observed by them, were referred to the appropriate department or division for follow-up.

Dave, Matt and Kevin did a fine job. The DNS appreciates their help during a very busy season. ☺



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ty owners and tenants. Some aspect of this information impacts every person in Milwaukee. At sometime, every citizen may have a need to get this information.

For the first time people can lookup in real-time the same information that inspectors and staff at DNS use. This is the same information that would be available if you requested it in person at the DNS offices or at City Hall. Looking through the four primary categories of ownership, service requests, violations and permits, one can determine the status of a number of items. There are disclaimers to be read but every effort is made to have the most accurate and timely information possible on the web.

Neighborhood groups can lookup ownership and violations to determine the progress being made on problem properties. Rental property owners can use the ownership contact information to verify tenant history. Tenants can review complaint and permit history to investigate the condition of rentals they might

"Your site looks awesome! Who knew a city department web site could actually be fun? It's cool....thanks!"

—Ann Laatsch — Community Advocates

consider renting. Home buyers can lookup tax bill status and amounts. Contractors can verify that a permit was pulled for a job. Callers can see if their complaint was taken and what the response was after it was investigated.

The site took two years to build and test. It was created with resources from within DNS, MIS and a consultant from Management Information Technologies. No special funding was used.

SOME NEW FEATURES OFFERED BY THE NSS WEB!

- Search by address, taxkey, entire block by address range, or owner's last name (if required to record).
- Find out if any service requests or complaints have been made.
- See if any violations have been issued or permits have been taken out for an address.
- Review a whole block at a time to look for violations, service requests, or permits.
- Check on the progress of a service request.
- Use the detailed help to understand the technical terms listed in the NSS and used by the department.

FEATURES OF THE ONE-CLICK INTERFACE

- Enter one address and get access to four city departmental data bases and seven key record files.
- With one click learn where to vote, the amount of taxes, amount of assessment, physical property description, tax balance, tax levy and more.

Even those with little or no computer expertise or building knowledge can navigate the site. A complete on-line detailed help guide is built into the DNS site. Users can quickly get answers about

DNS How to reach us



286-3646 - 1673 S. 9th St, 3rd Flr
286-5600 - 809 N. Broadway, 2nd Flr
286-3441 - 841 N. Broadway 10th floor

**Have a contribution for the next edition of the
DNS GRAPEVINE? Deadline October 15, 1999
Email it to Todd Weiler, Editor: tweile@ci.mil.wi.us**

technical terms that are listed in the records. They can even get the correct spelling of streets to look them up.

There is also a new listing for neighborhood groups. People interested in contacting other associations can find out what groups have organized, where they are located and what is happening. As more community groups grow, so will the network of people working to improve the community.

The direct address for the web site is:

<http://www.ci.mil.wi.us/citygov/dns/home.htm>

One can also find the one-click interface on the city's main site at (<http://ci.mil.wi.us>) under one of the main green buttons called PROPERTY INFORMATION.

The NSS system holds over 307,000 records. In the recording files there are 38,403 properties. Of those 19,732 are owned by Milwaukee residents for an assessed value of \$2,584,722,564. The remaining 18,671 properties are worth \$3,666,194,001 and owned by non-Milwaukee residents.

New features and updates will be added to the site later. Many users have e-mailed their thanks and appreciation for the new site. Typical hit volume on the site was running about 100 a day and now the current level has been hovering at about 1000 a day. All of the regular features of the site remain, including forms, brochures, and fun stuff for kids interested in fire safety. ☺

Commissioner's Corner

from Lee C. Jensen

This has been a busy and hectic summer. Our staff has had to learn new procedures and relationships while continuing their regular job duties. Almost all of our divisions have had to do this with fewer people and a constant workload. I extend a well-deserved thank you to all of the people who have provided the extra effort to maintain service to our customers.

In some areas our staff has been down 30 percent while the amount of work has remained constant. We have had to change some of the priorities for our inspections, but the critical work is getting done. The other good news is that the common council has authorized filling positions in the most pressed areas. However, it will take six months to a year to train the new employees and bring them up to where they can carry a district with all of the variety of tasks.

Each of you can take pride in the department's continuing work, the new initiatives that have taken place in the first eight months, and the dedication that has been shown to accomplish all of this.